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WITH THE WILLOW PTARMIGAN

By GRACE A. HILL

WITH FOUR PHOTOS

THE EGGS of the Willow Ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*) in the vicinity of Nome hatch about the first of July. On the fifth of July, 1915, my father, James F. Hill, and I made a trip "mushing" over the tundra north of Nome to where Boulder Creek joins the Synuk. At this time we saw several broods of the downy yellow-and-brown fledglings of these Ptarmigan.

When we came upon the first brood the mother feigned a broken wing and the young hid in the tundra grass. My father caught one of the little balls of down which posed patiently in his hands while I took several photographs of it.

Shortly afterwards, as we approached a small clump of willows, we saw a female Ptarmigan struggling in the grass as though from a mortal wound. I had never seen a bird in more evident distress and could not at first believe that she was feigning. But when I came near, she ran a few feet dragging her right wing. I then turned to look for the young, the little grove presenting a likely hiding place.

Although the day was overcast, there seemed to be sufficient light to enable one to distinguish every detail in the carpet of dead leaves beneath the willows. Yet I had not taken two steps, watching carefully, when a young Ptarmigan scurried literally from under my foot-fall. Startled, I watched intently as I took another step; and again one of the birds just escaped being trod upon. Evidently I was standing in the midst of the Ptarmigan's brood, but could not distinguish a bird until it moved. My attention focused upon a spot a few feet from me. Gradually the outline of a fluffy, unblinking birdling became pricked upon my vision. His camouflage against the brown and mottled background of faded leaves and twigs was perfect.

I cast my eye about to find the rest of the brood. Having no success I glanced back to the spot of my discovery. The bird was gone. I gave the laurels to Nature and quietly crept from the field of action.

Five weeks later we again visited Boulder Creek. We were told by two miners who had spent the summer on the creek, that the Willow Ptarmigan had congregated in the creek-bed until there were, they estimated, over four hundred Ptarmigan in the vicinity of their camp. These men told us how the female birds with the more than half grown young trailed up and down the stream look-



Fig. 29. WILLOW PTARMIGAN AND BROOD ON THE NINTH OF AUGUST, 1915, NEAR NOME, ALASKA.



Fig. 30. FLOCK OF PTARMIGAN MAKING A DIGNIFIED RETREAT BEFORE THE CAMERA. THE PROTECTIVE COLORATION OF THE BIRDS AT THIS SEASON AND IN THIS ENVIRONMENT IS ALMOST PERFECT. SIX BIRDS ARE TO BE FOUND IN THIS PICTURE.

ing for food, and paid little attention to the mining operations which went on all day within a few feet of their course.

Being instructed as to a likely spot for a picture I opened my camera and sat down. I had not long to wait. A low talking, as of a domestic hen and her chickens, told me of the advancing brood. When they came in sight the talking ceased and the mother bird who led the procession gave some slight indication of uneasiness, but they moved on leisurely. The flock consisted of the female



Fig. 31. THE WILLOW PTARMIGAN IN WINTER
IS AN IMPORTANT SOURCE OF FOOD FOR THE
ESKIMOS.

and five young. At this season the birds were almost an exact counterpart of the stream bed.

When I arose and approached for a nearer picture, the birds paused a moment, as though to contemplate, and then decided to cross the little stream. This each did with a short easy flight, and the brood proceeded up the incline on the opposite side without the least display of undignified haste. I pressed in my pursuit and got a picture just as they disappeared under a clump of willows.

They did not manifest any more, if as much, fear as biddy with her chicks might have shown.

In the autumn when the birds begin to molt they frequent more the open tundra than the stream beds. The color of the tundra at this time is perfect for the protection of the birds. The first white feathers of the Willow Ptarmigan

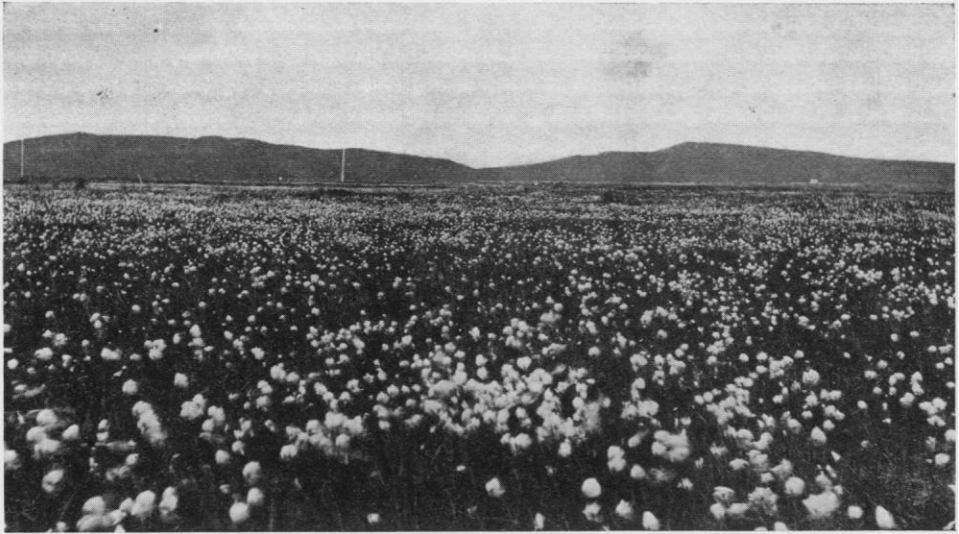


Fig. 32. TUNDRA BACK OF NOME, ALASKA, THE LAST OF AUGUST. THE WHITE COTTON-GRASS AIDS IN THE PROTECTIVE COLORATION OF THE FALL MOLT OF THE WILLOW PTARMIGAN.

appear about the head. At this season the tawny, tundra grass (*Eriophorum polystachyum*) is bearing its white, cottony plumes. So, while it is still warm and sunny, and there is yet no hint of snow, the Willow Ptarmigan may begin to change his coat in perfect safety.

Pullman, Washington, April 22, 1922.